

Emery

ALMSGIVING SOCIETIES. ✓

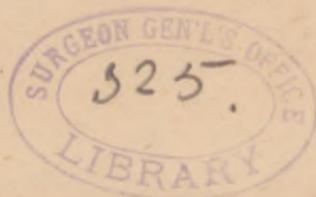
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The questions of pauperism and crime in the District of Columbia, as elsewhere, have been difficult questions to solve. Kind and affectionate parents, who dislike to have their sons and daughters pressed into mental or manual activity beyond their own inclinations, especially if there is an appearance of their doing so to secure a livelihood, often — unconsciously, it may be — create an impression that labor is humiliating. Such parents are preparing their children for a condition of dependence and pauperism; and sooner or later, in the ordinary course of events, they will either knock at the doors for charity or be tempted, in desperation, to secure a berth behind the prison bars. This cause of poverty is not infrequently found in localities where manual labor has not been so popular as in other places; and, in the eighteen years of constant and active work among the poor of Washington, I have been seriously impressed with the magnitude of this class of cases.

For many years there existed a peculiar necessity for special effort to prevent suffering among the poor of Washington. In 1866, the Provident Aid Society first dispensed alms to those in apparent need, without any positive motive other than to relieve immediate want. It established soup-houses; and long lines of men and women came daily, with wonderful regularity, for a bucket of soup, every day adding new clogs to whatever sensibilities of manhood remained. Year after year, food and fuel were dispensed so indiscriminately as to educate to imposture, to demoralize, and to fill the District of Columbia with an unprofitable and dangerous element. The Provident Aid Society, overwhelmed with applications for aid and conscious of a necessity for a change, closed its work.

Then followed the county and city boards of trustees; and, for six years, these two agencies disbursed the public funds by almsgiving exclusively, with the most undeserving, as usual, to the front for aid. In the county there was an alphabetical registry commenced, but it did not extend into the city; and it was found that begging continued to increase. During the last year of its work, about thirty thousand dollars was expended for what is termed out-door relief of the poor; and it was during that year that a plan to apply the labor test was



conceived, and the Washington Labor Exchange was organized in 1877, with the following declaration:—

“Recognizing the wisdom and true charity of helping the poor and unemployed to help themselves, the people of the District of Columbia have organized the Washington Labor Exchange. . . . It is our earnest purpose to discourage indiscriminate almsgiving, and to prevent, in a measure, the pauperism which forms so painful a feature in our community.”

It was the beginning of a new era; and, during the first year of its existence, 4,228 persons made application for employment, and employment was found for 1,250. The influences of the Labor Exchange were good. It formulated a declaration of principles which formed the basis for future action. It gave no alms, and finally became little more than an intelligence office without a systematic record; and it closed its work. It was succeeded by another organization for almsgiving exclusively; and the old, familiar faces came again for their share. This organization continued about two years, and matters grew worse instead of better.

In the light of about fifteen years' experience, and with a sense of the necessity for co-operation, the Associated Charities was organized. Its object was to dispense charity on a prudent, discriminating, economic, and systematic plan,—a plan which should keep the man who is about to fall from falling, lift a man up gently when he has fallen; advise, investigate, stimulate to nobler ambition by awakening a sense of self-respect, a pride in self-support and responsibility; keep an accurate registry, and institute a system of prompt and intelligent relief, without offending or wounding the most delicate sensibilities by exposure or harshness. It became incorporated early in 1882, and immediately established a central office, distributed fifteen thousand circulars setting forth its plans and purposes, divided the district into eighteen subdivisions of convenient size, fourteen of which organized, selected, and arranged the work of their visitors, raised their own funds as far as possible, kept a systematic registry of particulars, and reported to the central office in detail, where a ledger of particulars of the whole city was kept.

The central board of managers consists of fifteen elected members and a delegate from each subdivision, or co-operating organization. This central board meets monthly, makes rules for its own action, and, so far as it is necessary to effect uniformity, makes rules governing the action of the subdivisions.

In a few months, quite an accurate record and history of the poor and of impostors had been alphabetically arranged at the central office ; and the citizens began sending to it their applicants, and the army of beggars began to disappear.

The work of reform had commenced. No more indiscriminate almsgiving was countenanced. A scrutinizing investigation was made, and a careful, confidential record was kept. The plan was to clear away the professional beggars and impostors from the front, so that the real, quiet suffering could be found, and receive proper attention ; that all might be helped to help themselves in the truest possible sense, by finding or furnishing employment for such as could work, by furnishing or obtaining transportation for others to friends, or to some place where they could support themselves, by advice and friendly encouragement, by an occasional loan to keep a family sheltered, by reference to associations, churches, and employers of labor, by instructions in the arts that are conducive to self-support, and giving alms only as a last resort or when stubborn necessity should demand.

By careful and persistent efforts and with the co-operation of the citizens, associations, the authorities of the district, and some of the churches, we are now able to present, as the results of our systematic efforts, not a perfect condition, but a condition of reform of which every citizen who has an interest in our nation's capital may justly be proud. We have a city practically rid of its street and door-to-door beggars ; and impostors and professionals, who stood in the way of innocent sufferers, have been unmasked and dislodged. The homes of the quiet and innocent suffering poor are now visited, relief is administered intelligently and helpfully. A school for instruction of girls in housework, a sewing class, a free kindergarten, a cooking class, and a wood-yard are established and maintained at the central office ; and several industrial schools, kindergartens, and nurseries are maintained by the subdivisions.

The results, while they may not be all that we might wish, are exceedingly gratifying. We discover no injurious effects from the alms we give, but rather an evidence of gratitude, appreciation, and recognition of the fact that a friend has been found, and new and invigorating hopes and courage are restored. But the relief given must be administered with discretion and thoughtfulness and accompanied by words of caution, followed up by a kindly assurance that it is self-support that must be sought, and that whatever aid is now bestowed is but to guide them into the channels of employment. I

believe the system can be maintained, that co-operation is and will be increased, and that out-door relief will be under wholesome restraint and control.

Manual labor must be dignified, so that the mechanics toiling at the bench or at the forge, and the farmers in tilling the soil, shall feel as proud of the labor of their hands as they that are called to the professions in life; and they that toil honestly for their daily bread shall not feel humiliated or proscribed on that account, or inferior to those whose fortunes permit them to live in luxury and ease. If we would keep our sons and daughters pure and prosperous, we must inculcate the true principles of honest industry and economy, as well as honor the calling whereunto they are called. And, as much pauperism and crime arise from intemperance, it behooves us to make our investigations broad and deep, and to act wisely in applying the remedies for each.

In rendering relief, it should be that which will elevate and not depress, that which will inspire courage and resolute action, economy in the affairs of life, temperance in all things, and the acquirement of some practical knowledge of work whereby a livelihood may be earned. Then we shall have done much toward helping our fellow-men to help themselves, and toward the suppression of the great evils of the hour. Conventions may be held, resolutions may be passed with all their glittering generalities; but the great burden of relief and reform must be borne by our practical efforts with our co-laborers at our respective places of abode, after we go hence, with the inspiration of this Conference upon us.